

Dying to Shame; Rising With Pride
by Rev. Durrell Watkins , M.A., M.Div.
Pride Sunday 2008 (Romans 6.1-11; Matthew 10.24-31)

I do this every once in a while, I hope you don't mind, but we need to have a bit of bible study this morning. I know, who comes to church for the bible? But sometimes, there's just no getting 'round it. To have a passage like the one we have today from Romans, we really must spend some time reflecting on it.

Let's name it. Let's be honest. Romans is one of those books of the bible that has been used to beat up, terrorize, exclude, vilify, and shame same-gender loving people. *And why?* Because of two verses toward the end of the first chapter.

Out of 16 chapters in Romans, there are TWO verses that have been used like poisonous darts against LGBT people, which has not only been a terrible injustice to same-gender loving people and gender-variant people and their friends and families, but also to the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul.

I won't bother reading those verses from chapter one. We almost can't hear them as they were intended because of the ways they have been misused to promote heterosexism and homophobia; but I will tell you what is often presented as a condemnation of same-gender love is in fact a condemnation of idolatry. Mutual attractions and covenantal fidelity, regardless of the genders that make up a relationship, are never condemned in the bible and certainly were never condemned by Jesus.

The question frequently comes up...How can we make OTHERS believe that God doesn't share their prejudices? I don't know that we can make anyone believe anything. My great-aunt Gladys used to say: *Never try to teach a hog to sing...it annoys the hog and wastes your time.*

We aren't doing the work of progressive, positive, practical spirituality as an attempt to teach hogs to sing, that is, as a way of making people do what they don't want to do. We are doing this important work so that we can celebrate freedom and joy in our own lives and have it to offer those who do want it.

The Book of Romans is a theological essay arguing AGAINST religious legalism; and so isn't it ironic that two verses from Romans have been lifted out of their historical, literary, cultural, and linguistic contexts to promote homophobia in the Church of Jesus Christ. Paul would be appalled.

In the days of the Roman Empire, something called "good news" was frequently proclaimed. The good news was that Caesar was well in charge. His enemies were defeated, his people were cared for, and the empire prospered. This was the good news, the Gospel of Caesar.

And here comes Paul, a Roman citizen, calling himself a servant not of the emperor but of Jesus Christ, a person the emperor's government executed!

Paul further insults the powers that be by saying he has been set apart for the *gospel of God*. Not the good news that Caesar, who was sometimes called a god, was doing well; but the good news that an Ultimate Reality of ever-present, all-inclusive love was leaving no one out!

This was Paul's good news...it was subversive.

It was seditious.

It was provocative; and it earned him a lot of jail time and in the year 64 AD it cost him his head.

But this is how Paul begins his letter to the Romans...proclaiming the all-inclusive, unconditional Good News that is experienced not by legalistic zeal, not by following a long list of do's and don'ts, but by simply expressing faith in the God that is perfect Love.

The Good News isn't that God loves straight people...though, of course, God does.

The Good News isn't that God loves men, or Americans, or even Christians...though, of course, God does.

The Good News is that Caesar and all the political and religious powers since Caesar who think they run the world are mistaken...there is an infinite Compassion that we call God and that God is available to all life at all times forever — this is the Gospel, the Good News and in Romans 1.16, Paul declares boldly, "I am not ashamed of this Gospel; it is the power of God for liberation (or salvation) to everyone (*everyone!*) who has faith..."

In other words, the news is good for everyone who trusts that it's good. Paul contrasts Gospel with Law throughout Romans, and he is making a case for Gospel OVER law.

Now, Romans has some odd sounding passages, I can't deny it. Today's is part of the on-going case that Paul is making for God's Love triumphing over human perceptions of God's law. Love over Law, Relationship over Rules, Dignity over Dogma...this is Paul's Good News.

What is all this law business, anyway? Remember, in the Exodus, people are saved from the injustice of slavery...they are liberated but that means they have to wander into an unforeseeable future...they have to walk by faith and not by sight. They have to trust the process because they don't have any answers or promises, other than the promise that one day they will arrive at a better place.

During the wandering, Moses goes up on a mountain and brings down the Law. The Law is THEIR law, not Egyptian law, not the law that enslaves them, but THEIR law for THEIR society and for THEIR good. But when Moses brings the law to them, he sees they have erected an idol, a golden calf, a symbol of Apis the bull-god of Egypt. They're free, but they long to return to their place of oppression, where they were not valued, not appreciated, not respected, not treated with dignity. They have erected an idol to the oppressive past, and Moses loses his mind...he has a bunch of them killed, even though the law he was bringing the people said killing really is a no-no.

So from the beginning, the Law never made people embrace freedom. Paul says we are free from that experiment that never really worked. Rather than trying to conform to a Law that from the beginning we didn't appreciate, let's be people of faith. Faith means "trust" and if we will TRUST God, then we'll do what is right. Faith will make us people of integrity...Law can't do that. Law infantilizes us if we obey it blindly, and it makes us criminals if we don't. But faith, trust, that can help transform us into the enlightened people we are meant to be.

Trusting God's goodness and trusting that God's goodness is expressing through us, we won't need legalism. We'll be who we are supposed to be, and the LAW can't be used against us. Faith/trust will lead us into true freedom and once we have tasted the power of freedom, surely we'll never want to go back.

In the old way of thinking, to sin was to break the law; and really, every one did. Paul redefines sin to be not a single mistake or transgression, but a condition of not realizing our true sacred value. Should we continue on in sin...not knowing how sacred and beautiful we really are, just as we are? By no means! We died to that kind of self-loathing; how can we go back to it? And just like Jesus died but lives on in our hearts, we died to thinking of ourselves as helpless sinners, and now we live on in new hope and empowerment.

If Jesus experienced the power of Resurrection, he will not die again. If we died to the notion that we are worthless sinners, we will not believe that about ourselves again. We are raised to new awareness. We are not bound by legalism; we have been raised to the power of liberation and celebration. We are part of a new understanding of our sacred value and we will never go back to being oppressed by misused religion ever again. We have been set free.

We are the people of God, just as we are.
Hear me leather folk.
Hear me transgender folk.
Hear me heterosexuals.
Hear me gays and lesbians.
Hear me people living with AIDS.
Hear me Democrats and Republicans.
Hear me interfaith couples.
Hear me, diverse people of God.

We have died to thinking ourselves stained with sin; and we are now alive to the loving, life-giving presence of God within us. God cares for us, down to the last detail of our lives. This is what the Jesus story demonstrates for us. This is the message of Paul to OUR community. And this is the good news. Amen.

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Christ in me lives today.
The love of God lives in me today.
The power of God raises me up with joy today.
I am renewed.
I give thanks for who I am.
And so it is!

"It is clear what we should be most proud of: that we dream dreams and make them come true."
— Gary J. Stern